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AN UNORTHODOX EXPERIMENT

It was Professor Baker of Harvard who promulgated the famous view that secondary education supplies students with a coat warranted to shed ideas; and it is Professor Bates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who so seconds this statement that the first six weeks of Rhetoric I at "Tech" is a rigorous course in logic, with little or no theme-writing. Though I have long been convinced of the fallacy of Professor Baker's assumption, I have hitherto had only a most illogical reason for my doubt—merely that I was (and am) a heretic as far as acceptance of any commandments in composition teaching is concerned. Recently, however, I have had some unexpected confirmation of my attitude. The results of an experiment of mine seem to me worth the publishing.

For certain reasons I change each year my methods of teaching Rhetoric I in the University of ——. This autumn, having been allowed for the first time full swing, I determined to test Professor Baker's hypothesis. I first cast from my class of 34 nine "subnormals"—subnormals in composition despite high-school grades from Deerskin, Denver, and Chicago of 70 to 90. The rest I instructed to buy Woolley's *Handbook of Composition* and Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature*. Of course I also required the purchase of a well-known rhetoric—which, however, I have not used at all.

Let me be frank. I used to hate Woolley's *Handbook*. I opposed its introduction at our university; more than that, being a heretic, I placidly ignored it for a year after I was forced to make students secure it. Now, however, I know the source of my antagonism. I was lazy. I did not realize that the mastery by the teacher of the numbering of its essential rules enormously simplifies the dreary part of composition teaching. How? One merely scratches the number of a rule beside an error in a theme and insists on the elimination from future work of that particular violation.

But my present experiment concerns Huxley; I mastered my Woolley a year ago. After ordering Huxley's *Essays*, I scanned my section and breathed a long sigh of dismay. The students were a motley group from high schools of both deserved and undeserved reputation: from my first themes (of September 20) I learned that only one student out of 25 was "clever"; and, as usual, this girl hated to think. However, I crossed the Rubicon. Instead of the vapid, if ingenious, subjects I had assigned in past years, I required my young victims to read essay

after essay. I gave no help before a chapter was read; and when, fresh from bewildered struggle with their author, the students came to class, they were confronted with such topics for class-themes as: "The Conclusions toward Which Huxley Seems Tending"; "The Descent of the Polar Bear from the Brown Bear"; "Huxley and My Religion"; "What I Know of the Solution of the Problem of Life's Origin since Huxley," etc. At the University of ——— we are accustomed to a metaphorical slaughter of our Freshmen in Rhetoric I; as a determined opponent of "making composition easy" I am inclined to be proud of the fact that last year about one-fifth of the Freshmen had to repeat the first semester's work. But never have I known such grades as my section had in mid-October; I was forced to report to the deans, in rather unheretical fear, 19 out of 24 students as below passing. One had already fled my section. Meanwhile, I could not divine the attitude of my students. They took their grades with an odd nonchalance such as I had never experienced; girls in especial are inclined to weep. But how the novitiates in thinking came for personal consultations! And how curiously attentive my tyros were, as in class I criticized and encouraged them to criticize their tottering erections founded upon Huxley. What attention I paid to coherence, unity, and emphasis seemed to reach them as never before. Logic appeared to them a living thing; and I recalled with wonder how at the Institute of Technology the syllogism had daily languished and died before a much better class.

But I have not meant this paper to be long. Today is mid-November. Each student has written fourteen "thoughtful" short themes. The students are now passing in the proportion of 20:24, and with grades of D to B+ (75-90). Furthermore, I have just finished an agreeable task, the reading of some definitely original long themes, in which my students discuss, with a frankness and cogency hitherto unknown to me in first long themes, why they like or dislike Huxley. That 12 out of 24 approve of studying Huxley interests me. That only 3 violently oppose the use of the book interests me yet more. But what most interests me is that these students, thrown, as one put it, into the Atlantic Ocean of thought, have begun to think and, having begun that arduous process, are nobly mastering unity, coherence, and emphasis. Even the secondary schools, evidently, have not provided this one section with completely idea-proof garments. And, as a reward for their efforts, my students are to think for a month about an Icelandic saga and questions moral instead of scientific.

My enthusiasm perhaps runs over-high. Yet of one thing I am

fairly sure. I may find a better mental swimming-tank than Huxley in which to exercise future Freshmen; but I shall never again ask my charges to buy either Doctor This's or Professor That's manual of rhetoric and composition.

MIDDLE WEST

To the Editor of the "English Journal":

In the December number I appreciated your gentle satire upon the subscribers of the *English Journal* who persistently ignore bills calling for the payment of their subscription dues. About the same time I received a circular from a large tobacco firm which sells cigars on trust. If you ask for a box of cigars the firm will send it to you, trusting to the honesty of the devotees of Lady Nicotine to pay in due course of time. This is their significant experience, 99½ per cent of those they trust are honest. Only one out of two hundred forgets to pay his bill.

Now here are some interesting problems for the experimental physiological psychologists:

1. Does the teaching of English or the reading of the *English Journal* weaken the moral fiber?
2. Is it worse to smoke and pay than to subscribe and delay?
3. Do honest men turn to tobacco because they are honest, or does the use of tobacco make a man honest?

Here is a great field for the investigator. And what a boon the answer to that third question might be to publishers. If it were determined that there lurks a hitherto unsuspected virtue in nicotine, all publishers, especially those devoted to that profession whose followers are so absorbed in elevating the morals of the young that they have no time to pay bills, might further their financial prosperity by starting a propaganda in favor of the universal use of tobacco.

I believe it was Spurgeon, the great London preacher, who said in all sincerity that he smoked for the glory of God. Subscribers to the educational journals might be induced to smoke for the profit of the publishers.

Yours,

A SUBSCRIBER WHO HAS PAID